

Books

Ends and Means

Presidents' Secret Wars: C.I.A. and Pentagon Covert Operations Since World War II. John Prados. New York: Morrow. 480 pp. \$22.95.

Out of Control: The Story of the Reagan Administration's Secret War in Nicaragua, the Illegal Arms Pipeline, and the Contra Drug Connection. Leslie Cockburn. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press. 287 pp. \$18.95.

Covert Action: The Limits of Intervention in the Postwar World. Gregory Treverton. New York: Basic Books. 304 pp. \$19.95.

Since the advent of the atomic era, the United States has decided to wage war by covert means, intervening secretly in the election, selection and direction of governments in other countries. Our weapons are subversive propaganda, including "black" propaganda and disinformation; undermining the economies of countries whose governments we oppose, and waging war, albeit covert war: assassination, terrorism, destruction of economic facilities, mining of harbors, instigation of insurrections and coups, and creation, training, support and provisioning of insurgents.

The list of examples is long: By extraconstitutional and illegal means, the United States initiated the fall, in 1953, of the legitimate Government of the populist nationalist Mohammed Mossadegh in Iran, and unseated, in 1954, the land-reforming Government of Jacobo Arbenz Guzman of Guatemala. For his sin of nonalignment, in 1957 and 1958 we attempted a coup against Sukarno in Indonesia.

We conducted paramilitary operations in Tibet from the 1950s into the 1970s, prolonging and exacerbating the agonies of a subject people,

without the slightest hope of affecting the Government of China.

In 1961, we invaded Cuba at the Bay of Pigs. That year, we also overthrew the Government of Patrice Lumumba in the Congo and were complicit in his death.

In Laos, in the early 1960s, the Central Intelligence Agency secretly supported a right-wing faction in the military against the legitimate but neutralist Government, forcing the incumbent into alliance with the Communists. Under President John Kennedy, we waged clandestine war in Vietnam before and during the time of our open involvement, bombing supply lines of the Viet Minh and dropping toxic chemicals and defoliants. After 1968, President Richard Nixon escalated secret warfare across the Vietnamese border into Cambodia. Hundreds of cross-border operations occurred in 1967 and 1968, over a thousand during the following two years. In 1969, B-52 carpet bombing commenced. Pentagon records were falsified to indicate that the raids occurred in South Vietnam.

Our support of the Kurds of Kurdistan at the urging of the Shah of Iran in his dispute with Iraq ended in disaster for the Kurds when we abandoned them after the Shah made temporary peace with Iraq in 1975.

In Chile, we successfully ended a century of democratic tradition by covert operations that aided the overthrow and murder of President Salvador Allende Gossens. This action was made possible by the prior assassination of the Commander in Chief of the Chilean Armed Forces, a constitutionalist who vigorously opposed any coup. Chile's current dictator, General Augusto Pinochet, led the coup that overthrew and killed Allende.

After the heyday of C.I.A. covert war in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, the use of covert action declined under Presidents Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter. By 1980, covert action received less than 5 percent of the C.I.A. budget. But with the advent

of the Reagan Administration, covert actions tripled in number, and by the mid-1980s such operations accounted for about one-third of the C.I.A. budget.

Within weeks of his inauguration, President Ronald Reagan prepared for covert war in Nicaragua by signing a Presidential "finding" that authorized covert war. After creating the contras from the remnants of the National Guard that served under former dictator Anastasio Somoza Debayle and arranging for their training by C.I.A. and Argentine operatives—the latter fresh from conducting a "dirty war" against their own compatriots—we sent the contras into Nicaragua against "soft targets," i.e., power plants, schools, transportation and people. This tactic guaranteed a protracted war of attrition marked by terrorism and atrocities, disproportionate civilian casualties and enormous suffering. In late 1983 and early 1984, before Congress temporarily turned off the money spigot with the Boland Amendment, the Administration and Director of Central Intelligence William Casey laid plans for alternative funding of the contras through secret channels from South Africa, Saudi Arabia and, it has been alleged repeatedly, Israel. Additional, private funds were tapped in the United States, South Korea, Latin America and Taiwan. Throughout, however, United States Government support continued under cover of private means, primarily to distract the press and our own citizens. Meanwhile, old C.I.A. hands and covert warriors from adventures in Laos, Vietnam, the Bay of Pigs, Guatemala and Chile returned to take part in the sale of weapons to the Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran and to wage war in Nicaragua.

What have we to show for all this? Perhaps we made the world safe in 1954 for the United Fruit Company in Guatemala. But we unleashed a ruthless militarist government and guerrilla opposition, both of which have since killed thousands of their

own fellow citizens. The legacy of our covert actions in Iran and throughout much of the Middle East is that we are roundly hated. In Latin America, democrats and economic and social reformers can hardly look to America for support. In Asia, our efforts have precipitated, and exacerbated, massive death and dislocation of millions of people.

And in our own country, we, too, have paid a price. Our laws governing war and violence have been shredded by administrations driven by an intense ideological zealotry unmatched in the United States in this century. Congressional control over the power to decide for war or peace, meant by the framers of the Constitution to be complete, has been lost by Congressional default as much as by Presidential usurpation.

We are naive indeed if we believe that our domestic politics is not affected by these methods and their advocates. If we are so completely convinced of the righteousness of our goals that our means, however brutal, can be ignored, what is to stop the application of such means against American citizens who would dissent from their use or the ends they aim to achieve? If, as Oliver North so eloquently and starkly stated, our allegiance must be to the leader who shares the end-vision rather than to the constitutional system of democratic means, why not apply the same tactics to those of our fellow citizens who stand in the way? The recent exposure of Federal Bureau of Investigation surveillance of organizations opposed to Reagan's Central American policies is a case in point.

We have, indeed, suffered an appalling loss of virtue.

How did we get here? By what failure of leadership do we find ourselves initiating and supporting war, massive death and suffering, and emulating the worst practices of our adversaries?

The ferocity of our ideological struggle with the Soviets since World War II has blinded us to the dialectical relationship that always exists between ends and means. Perhaps the start of the Cold War with Russia so soon after the war against Hitler's Germany, coupled with the enormity of Stalin's crimes against his own people, seduced us into continuing to view the world in Manichean terms. We therefore continued conducting

covert operations at the margin of the law, along the lines of the wartime Office of Strategic Services, even after peace was declared.

The Second World War has been called the "last just war." Something approaching the triumph of absolute good or absolute evil was at stake in that war, characterized as it was by naked aggression and war crimes, including the greatest crime against humanity of all time, the Holocaust. Within this paradigm of absolutes, we continued the crusade, blinded to the dialectic between ends and means.

With an adversary who dominated Eastern Europe and was allied with a Communist giant on the Asian continent, and whom we saw (or thought we saw) behind much of the violence in the Third World, we felt we must act. Yet because that enemy possessed nuclear weapons, we had to acknowledge that war was too dangerous.

A passage from the C.I.A.'s Doolittle Report on Covert Operations, commissioned by President Dwight D. Eisenhower (and declassified in 1976), reveals the powerful ideological zealotry of the time:

Another important requirement is an aggressive covert psychological, political and paramilitary organization more effective . . . and, if necessary, more ruthless than that employed by the enemy. . . . There are no rules in such a game. Hitherto acceptable norms of human conduct do not apply.

What the authors of that report and those who accepted its recommendations forgot was that such savage means—the world of car bombs, terrorism, intentional killing and maiming of civilians, subversion of legitimate governments, corruption of mass media in other countries and in our own—would inevitably affect the end we sought: peace and justice in our own land.

Three writers have given us good books that might help us extricate ourselves from our moral quagmire. The best and most complete is John Prados's *Presidents' Secret Wars: C.I.A. and Pentagon Covert Operations Since World War II*. Prados describes each major paramilitary action our Government has mounted through the C.I.A. and the Special Forces, from Iran and Guatemala in the 1950s through Southeast Asia in the 1960s to Latin America in

the 1970s and 1980s. Though the book was completed before the revelation of the Iran-contra scandal, Prados nonetheless saw much of it coming, and describes the beginnings of what was to become the gravest constitutional crisis of the Reagan Administration.

By far the best account of the Nicaraguan side of the Iran-contra affair is the passionate, fearless exposé by Leslie Cockburn, *Out of Control: The Story of the Reagan Administration's Secret War in Nicaragua, the Illegal Arms Pipeline, and the Contra Drug Connection*. This book is not a scholarly compendium but rather a vivid and lucid step-by-step account of our involvement in a vicious war of aggression against a state so small and so poor as to inspire even former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, in a passing moment of candor, to describe Nicaragua as a "dagger pointed at the heart of Antarctica."

Cockburn goes beyond the report of the Senate and House Select Committees on Iran and Nicaragua to address allegations of C.I.A. involvement in an attempted assassination of Eden Pastora, a former Sandinista who became a contra leader but refused to join the groups dominated by Somoza's former National Guard leaders. She concludes that cocaine and other drugs have been smuggled into this country by several of the same operatives and through the same channels that support the contras.

Gregory Trevorton, in his *Covert Action: The Limits of Intervention in the Postwar World*, covers the same time period and subject matter as Prados. His book has the advantage, however, of including the Iran-contra scandal. But because Trevorton organizes his material analytically rather than chronologically, a reader unfamiliar with the subject can become confused. His text also lacks the rich detail and texture Prados's case-by-case treatment provides. Still, this analytical organization provides valuable insight.

Conclusions can be drawn from our experience with covert action since World War II. The first concerns the negative effect of covert operations on decision-making in a democratic society. A democratic state is built upon decisions made openly in public debate. Such debate is a compelling necessity when questions of war and peace and life and death are at issue.

Covert operations severely cripple the disclosure of information that fuels debate. The electorate has no opportunity to debate and possibly legitimize actions supposedly taken in its name and interest. Critical flaws that would be apparent in the light of day have no chance to appear. No debate occurs within government generally. Congress plays almost no role; at best, only a handful receive "notification" and those who do constitute a group that is dangerously close to being an "old boy" network of minority and majority leaders.

Even debates between the White House and officials from the Departments of State and Defense may be dangerously limited or nonexistent. Crucial parts of the Iran-contra affair, for example, saw White House control over the operations of clandestine activity routed directly from the National Security Council to the C.I.A., excluding or ignoring advice from Cabinet officers at State and Defense. Even within the C.I.A., "need to know" divisions between intelligence evaluation and clandestine operations often mean that the assessments of the former have no impact on decisions and operations of the latter.

Another conclusion concerns the erosion of our laws by covert operations. The United States Constitution places the power to decide for war or peace entirely with Congress, not with the President. There is only one exception: If our country is attacked suddenly, we are at war and the President may act in self-defense with no authorization from Congress.

It is abundantly clear that the framers intended that Congress, and Congress alone, have the power to initiate war, declared or undeclared, the original draft of the war clause having been changed from "to make war" to "to declare war" in order to preserve a Presidential power to repel sudden attacks on our country.

The war clause grants Congress all power to decide upon war, only self-defensive response to sudden attacks upon this country being excepted. This includes public or private war, declared or undeclared, fought with public forces or by mercenaries or other brigands operating under authority of the state. It also includes individual acts of war or sustained hostilities.

No statute of Congress authorizes covert war or acts of war. The Na-

tional Security Act of 1947, usually relied upon by Presidents to justify their covert acts, makes no mention of covert or paramilitary operations. While providing for intelligence acquisition and analysis, this statute only authorizes the C.I.A. to "perform such other functions and duties related to intelligence affecting the national security as the National Security Council may from time to time direct."

The Hughes-Ryan Amendment of 1974 forbids clandestine operations other than intelligence activity unless the President "finds" that such an operation is important to the national security and reports a description of the operation to Congress "in timely fashion." While it could be argued that this provision authorizes covert actions when the above specifications are met, the statutory language is negative, forbidding certain acts.

The Constitution's Commander-in-Chief clause gives the President no power to commit forces of the United States to war or to order acts of war when the nation is at peace. Unless we are attacked, only Congress is empowered to change this condition.

Since the end of World War II, international law has been flagrantly violated by the covert actions of several administrations. International law calls upon states to resolve disputes by peaceful means, demands that noncombatants be protected, places severe limitations on acts of reprisal, denies the right of political assassination, brands terrorism a violation of the laws of war, forbids torture and mutilation, calls upon all states to respect the sovereignty of other states and assumes the good faith of states that extend recognition and peaceful relations to other states. These and many other provisions have been violated as a matter of course during our covert wars.

Finally, some philosophical conclusions. Covert activity has a detrimental effect on the moral life of our country. There is indeed a dialectical relationship between ends and means. Warlike means, however covert, come back to haunt us. Most important, what supposedly distinguishes us from our adversaries is not so much the ends we seek as the limitations we are willing to place upon the means we employ to get there. We all seek peace and security in a just state, however defined. But only a tyranny unaffected by a sense of

morality that places enormous value on human life could justify the initiation of murderous violence in other than the most compelling circumstances of self-defense and when no other choices of peaceful resolution are available. That simply is not the record of our own experience with covert actions.

Fidelity to our own process is a promise that those who lead us make with each other and with those they lead. Such a promise is an institutional reflection of our common fallibility. Government itself is a recognition of such fallibility. Those who break this bond demonstrate an arrogance that makes them unsuitable to lead us.

Few goals of foreign policy are so valuable that, in order to achieve them, we should do such violence to our system of government. "Our" terrorists are not physically or spiritually distinguishable from "their" terrorists. The only thing that stops our terrorists from running away with the state is our deeply rooted constitutional system. This system is dominated almost entirely by the way in which we define our means: namely, through our jurisprudence of due process of law and democratic government.

It is not simply a failure of the system when constitutional checks are available but ignored. When the President directs the C.I.A. to supply large numbers of our most lethal weapons to Iranian fanatics and terrorists *and* at the same time directs the agency not to comply with the law about informing Congress *and* ignores objections by his Secretaries of State and Defense, the failure is not in law and government. No system can protect us entirely from fools and zealots.

The Mafia reputedly began as a patriotic movement dedicated to Italian national unity. The Ku Klux Klan began, ostensibly at least, as an effort to temper Reconstructionist excesses. Their choices of violent means, coupled with excessive belief in their own virtue and omniscience, led to fatal perversions of their own essence.

In our own time, intelligence-gathering in our imperfect world may well be necessary. But the huge majority of our intelligence comes through means both open and legal. The C.I.A. and other intelligence branches read thousands of docu-

ments from other lands. Individuals increasingly cross porous borders. Professional groups conduct exchanges and read each other's literature. Formal governmental relations provide vital contacts. Electronic devices, exotic but not unambiguously illegal, allow us to see and hear each other almost without interference.

This is enough. Government based upon an assumption of perpetual crisis fulfills its own presumption. The belief that the world is a jungle and we must therefore behave like animals is self-fulfilling. Our record of covert actions is one of short-term embarrassment and long-term disaster. The advantages we achieve are overwhelmed by the violence we do to others and to ourselves. No system of Congressional oversight can realistically meet this challenge. If acts of violence and war are contemplated, let us debate this possibility in the open. I prefer the obvious risks this would entail to the corruption of our Government and our souls that is unavoidable in covert decisions to engage in covert war.

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